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Dangerous Thinking

NEWSPAPER reports on the exchange of sick and wounded prisoners of war in Korea have introduced some of us to a new term, apparently first used by the Chinese. Prisoners who have been indoctrinated by their captors are said to require "brain-washing" before they can be fit to move freely among their own people. South Koreans, poor fellows, are to have six months of it. Dangerous thoughts must be sponged away, presumably by an intensive course in right political "thinking." Methods used by British and American authorities are less crude; but it is clear from the cable messages that doubtful cases are being "screened" for observation.

At first sight this solemn treatment of men who have been exposed to ideological infection is too naive to be taken seriously. It seems to imply that the brain is entirely a receptive organ, and that thinking is a process set in motion by the repetition of slogans. George Orwell's sheep-like chant, "Four legs good, two legs bad," comes irresistibly to mind. Men are told what to believe; and to move away from the official line, to think for themselves, is treason. Before we decide, however, that these methods are only possible in dealing with illiterate or half-educated peasants, we need to be sure that they do not illustrate in extreme ways a state of mind that is also encroaching in the West. Independent thinking has never been easy. It presupposes a respect for facts, a belief that evidence should be studied before conclusions are reached, and a conviction that truth is sacred. At the present time the fear of Communism has created pressures which are being felt even in places where freedom of thought is traditional.

It is sometimes said that thought cannot be restrained. A man may think what he likes, and

must merely refrain from uttering thoughts which would place him under suspicion. But thinking is not complete until it is expressed. The man who says one thing, and thinks another, will gradually cease to have thoughts that are worth speaking. There are already signs that the fear of lower standards is being felt in American universities. A recent issue of *Time* gave a page to this theme, quoting academic leaders who are beginning to wonder if the investigating habit is not taking the "boldness" out of education. "You're afraid to use your imagination," said one professor. "Of course, every one of us pulls punches. I do." Young scholars, declared a historian, "examine everything in their writings, not for correctness, but for sentences that might conceivably be twisted around to trap them." And the Dean of Columbia University School of Journalism emphasised the difficulty of discussing public affairs "without fear that someone may make a record which may be investigated secretly. . . Silence on controversial subjects during private conversations, as well as in classrooms, is becoming so prevalent that it is dangerous to our liberties."

It should immediately be obvious that the situation is not out of control while intellectuals are able to make such statements publicly. But the danger signals to which they are pointing are not imaginary. Nor should we suppose that they can be confined to a country which is in the forefront of the fight against Communism. Fear and intolerance spread easily. The cold war, so-called, has brought an unwelcome need for "security measures" which in the past have been found appropriate only during a "shooting" war; but their purpose is defeated if they undermine the very liberties we are asked to defend. These liberties, we need to remember, are the results of dangerous thinking.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 8, 1953.